Gauff shocked as US reach United Cup quarters, Hurkacz stuns Zverev

PERTH: World number four Coco Gauff suffered her first-ever defeat at the United Cup on Monday when she was stunned by Spain's Jessica Bouzas Maneiro 6-1, 6-7 (3/7), 6-0 in a blow to her Australian Open preparations.

But after Taylor Fritz won to level the tie for the United States, Gauff made amends with Christian Harrison in the mixed doubles, beating Ivonne Cavalle-Reimers and Inigo Cervantes 7-6 (7/5), 6-0 to seal a quarter-final spot.

Gauff had won all six of her previous United Cup singles matches for the USA and had a 3-0 record in mixed doubles. It was the first win over a top-five player for Bouzas Maneiro.

"I know Coco and she's a fighter," the 42nd-ranked Bouzas Maneiro said in Perth. "She's there all the time in the match, so I knew that I had to be there. Even if you are 3-0 or 4-0 up, you have to be ready."

World number four Fritz, who is battling a knee problem, needed more than three hours to beat Jaume Munar 7-6 (7/4), 3-6, 7-6 (8/6).

Germany's world number three Alexander Zverev was also on the end of a shock United Cup result, beaten 6-3, 6-4 by Poland's Hubert Hurkacz, who had not played since June because of knee surgery.

The 28-year-old was nearly flawless in his comeback contest, landing 21 aces and committing no double faults as he beat three-time Grand Slam finalist Zverev in an hour and 23 minutes in Sydney.

Six-time Grand Slam winner Iga Swiatek beat Eva Lys 3-6, 6-3, 6-4 to secure the Group F tie in Poland's favour.

Swiatek dug deep to secure the decisive break in the 10th game of the final set to close out victory in just under two-and-a-half hours.

Earlier the Czech Republic knocked out Norway with a 3-0 win in Sydney.

The Australian Open starts on January 18.—Agencies

RED Bull KTM Factory Racing's Daniel Sanders of Australia in action during the second stage of the Dakar Rally, from Yanbu to Al Ula, on Monday.—Reuters

Dakar bike champion Sanders wins second stage to take lead

AL ULA: Australia's defending Dakar Rally motorbike champion Daniel Sanders moved into the overall lead after winning Monday's second stage in Saudi Arabia.

The 31-year-old covered the 518km route from Yanbu to Al Ula in 4hrs 13mins 37 seconds to cross the line 1min 35s clear of KTM team-mate Edgar Canet, who lost time with a couple of minor crashes.

American Ricky Brabec, the 2024 winner, completed the day's podium for Honda.

With this 10th stage win in motorsport's toughest challenge, Sanders climbed to the top of the bike standings by half a minute from Canet, winner of the prologue and opening stage, with Brabec 2min 18s back in third.

"The navigation was really tricky in some places but we fixed a couple of mistakes quickly and didn't lose too much time," said Sanders, who has been competing in the Dakar since 2021.

The rider, who lists bee-keeping as one of his hobbies and is known as 'Chucky', added: "I caught Edgar after around one hundred kilometres. It was so hard to catch him and pass him before.

"After that, there was some really tricky stuff and he [Canet] just sat behind and watched, followed and learned."

Canet was thankful to complete an eventful stage unharmed.

"Well, the stage is completed," said the 20-year-old Spaniard. "The truth is that it has been a long stage, 400km opening the track for the first time.

"I had a few crashes, as you can see, but hey, these things happen. There are some rocks that you can't see when you're looking at the roadbook," he added.

In the car category, American Seth Quintero beat his South African Toyota Gazoo Racing team-mate Henk Lategan by 1:42 with Saudi Arabia's reigning champion Yazeed Al Rajhi in third.

Qatar's five-time Dakar winner Nasser Al-Attiyah heads the standings driving for Dacia by just seven seconds from Quintero after coming in eighth in the stage.

Tuesday's third stage is a 422km special starting and ending in Al Ula.—AFP

SYDNEY: Australian opener Travis Head plays a shot during the fifth Ashes Test against England at the Sydney Cricket Ground on Monday.—Reuters

Head hits back for Australia after Root's majestic 160

SYDNEY: An imperious Joe Root hit a magnificent 160 to drive England to 384 in the fifth and final Ashes Test on Monday before Travis Head let rip to haul Australia back into the contest with a rapid-fire unbeaten 91.

Root's superb innings, his 41st ton to match Ricky Ponting, was only ended courtesy of a brilliant caught-and-bowled by Michael Neser, who finished with 4-60.

Australia were left to negotiate the final session of day two at a sold-out Sydney Cricket Ground, which they did for the loss of Jake Weatherald (21) and Marnus Labuschagne (48).

By stumps the hosts — who have already won the series — had raced to 166-2 with night-watchman Neser on one alongside Head.

"I think it's set interestingly," Root told TNT Sports. He added: "Most important for us is not panicking, not dwelling too much on what happened here.

"It's how we respond tomorrow morning and maximise that chance first up."

Weatherald, who needed a big score to stave off the critics, again failed to live up to expectations since making his debut at the first Test in Perth.

He was dropped twice in the space of three balls, by Root then Ben Duckett, before Ben Stokes trapped him lbw.

But Head, who like Root has slammed two centuries this series, was in the zone.

He clattered three boundaries off the second over from Matthew Potts, in the side for the injured Gus Atkinson, and there was no let-up, blitzing a quickfire 50 off 55 balls.

Labuschagne was also in good touch, stroking seven boundaries before thick-edging Stokes to Jacob Bethell at gully.

Labuschagne and Stokes had clashed between overs, with the England captain aiming an expletive at the batsman.

The hosts lead the series 3-1 and have already retained the Ashes, with England desperate for another win after victory at the previous Test in Melbourne.

"Fresh start tomorrow," said Neser. "But the wicket seems to be quickening up just a little bit, so we're going to be mindful of that tomorrow."

ROOT JOINS PONTING

England resumed at 211-3 but lost Harry Brook (84), Stokes (0) and Jamie Smith (46) before lunch.

Will Jacks (27), Brydon Carse (1) and Josh Tongue (0), along with Root, departed in the second session.

The day belonged to Root, who started on 72 and reached an almost chanceless century off 146 balls to reaffirm his status as an all-time great.

The 35-year-old had begun the series under pressure after failing to make a hundred in Australia over three previous Ashes tours.

Scoreboard

ENGLAND (1st Innings, overnight 211-3):
Z. Crawley lbw b Neser 16
B. Duckett c Carey b Starc 27
J. Bethell c Carey b Boland 10
J. Root c&b Neser 160
H. Brook c Smith b Boland 84
B. Stokes c Carey b Starc 0
J. Smith c Boland b Labuschagne 46
W. Jacks c Green b Neser 27
B. Carse c Carey b Green 1
M. Potts not out 1
J. Tongue b Neser 0
EXTRAS (B-1, LB-6, NB-3, W-2) 12
TOTAL (all out, 97.3 overs) 384
FALL OF WICKETS: 1-35 (Duckett), 2-51 (Crawley), 3-57 (Bethell), 4-226 (Brook), 5-229 (Stokes), 6-323 (Smith), 7-375 (Jacks), 8-382 (Carse), 9-384 (Root)
BOWLING: Starc 23-2-93-2 (1nb), Neser 18.3-2-60-4, Boland 26-2-85-2, Green 18-0-85-1 (1w, 1nb), Webster 5-0-20-0, Head 4-0-20-0, Labuschagne 3-0-14-1 (1w, 1nb)
AUSTRALIA (1st Innings):
T. Head not out 91
J. Weatherald lbw b Stokes 21
M. Labuschagne c Bethell b Stokes 48
M. Neser not out 1
EXTRAS (LB-1, NB-1) 5
TOTAL (for two wickets, 34.1 overs) ... 166
FALL OF WICKETS: 1-57 (Weatherald), 2-162 (Labuschagne)
STILL TO BAT: S. Smith, U. Khawaja, A. Carey, C.Green, B. Webster, M. Starc, S. Boland
BOWLING: Carse 9-1-43-0, Potts 7-0-58-0, Tongue 10-0-31-0, Stokes 8.1-2-30-2 (1nb)

He snapped the drought with an unbeaten 138 in the day-night Test at Brisbane and his exploits in Sydney drew him level third with Australia's Ponting on the all-time century-makers' list, with 41.

Only India's Sachin Tendulkar (51) and South Africa's Jacques Kallis (45) have scored more Test centuries.

Root and Brook came together with England in trouble at 57-3 on Sunday, with both eyeing big centuries on an ideal batting deck.

But Brook only lasted five balls on Monday, adding six to his overnight 78 before dabbing at a Scott Boland delivery and edging into the safe hands of Steve Smith at slip.

It ended a 169-run partnership, not just England's best of the series but the biggest by either team, surpassing Head and Alex Carey's 162 in Adelaide.

Stokes only survived 11 balls before getting the faintest of edges off Mitchell Starc to Carey.

Jamie Smith lived dangerously and was fortunate to survive after chipping Cameron Green to Labuschagne at cover on 22. He began walking off but replays showed Green overstepped and it was a no-ball.

He added another 24 before medium-pacer Labuschagne bagged him in his first over.

The run rate slowed significantly after lunch when the new ball was taken, but Root persisted, passing 150 for a 17th time, just one behind the legendary Don Bradman and three short of Tendulkar.

He and Jacks put on 52 for the seventh wicket until Jacks sent a leading edge to Green in the gully off Neser. Root was ninth man out and Tongue followed without any addition to the score.—AFP

Cricket Australia boss hits out at 'archaic' bad light rules

SYDNEY: Frustrated Cricket Australia boss Todd Greenberg vowed Monday to take up "archaic" bad light rules with the sport's governing body after a third of the opening day at the fifth Ashes Test was lost.

Play was halted 15 minutes before the scheduled tea break on Sunday in front of nearly 50,000 fans in the Sydney Cricket Ground due to fading light, gentle rain and lightning protocols.

There was no more action, with stumps called an hour before schedule at 5:00 pm, with the entire third session abandoned.

"There's a lot of things that I get frustrated with in cricket but bad light's one of them," Greenberg told SEN radio. "Yesterday, maybe more so than ever with a full house and millions watching on TV.

"We've got to find a better way in cricket ... where we try not to come off the field when it's bad light and show a greater willingness and intent to get back on."

ICC rules dictate that play cannot resume if the on-field umpires agree the light conditions are "dangerous or unreasonable".

They also state that it cannot start until at least 30 minutes after lightning strikes in the area, which perplexed fans in Sydney with play still suspended despite the skies beginning to brighten.

Greenberg said he had no immediate solution, but with light towers and cutting-edge technology believes there has to be a better way.

"What you can take from my comments is a desire to push at the global level of how we get better at these things because it felt like it wasn't good enough," he said. "I have talked about this a bit over the years, the nuance of cricket and some of the strange and archaic rules that sit within the sport.

"I'm sure there's conversations that can be had about how we can be slightly more progressive.

"I sound like a broken record, but we're in the entertainment business, and so I can't think of another business that continues to walk off in front of its fans."

Former England captain Michael Vaughan also urged a change in "mindset" among match officials and administrators.

"In T20 cricket you play in this. Test cricket is the one format that we do everything we possibly can to get off the pitch," he told the BBC. "The other two formats we do everything we possibly can to get on the pitch. I just don't understand why we don't have that same mindset in Test match cricket."—AFP

Bangladesh bans IPL broadcasts after Mustafizur snub

DHAKA: Bangladesh's interim government on Monday banned broadcasts of this year's Indian Premier League (IPL), the latest flashpoint in a growing row with neighbouring India.

The move follows the Indian cricket board's decision to have Kolkata Knight Riders drop Bangladesh pacer Mustafizur Rahman, who had signed for the IPL franchise for this season.

Bangladesh have also refused to play their matches of next month's Twenty20 World Cup in India, demanding those be staged in Sri Lanka, co-host of the 20-team tournament.

The unceremonious dumping of a "star player" like Mustafizur from the IPL "defied logic" and had "hurt people", the country's Ministry of Information and Broadcasting said in a statement explaining its decision.

The IPL, the world's richest T20 league, is scheduled from March 26 to May 31.

The International Cricket Council (ICC) did not reply to Reuters emails inquiring whether it would agree to Bangladesh's demand of playing their World Cup matches in Sri Lanka.

Tensions have risen in recent weeks between India and Bangladesh.

Hundreds protested near Bangladesh's High Commission in New Delhi last month after a Hindu factory worker was beaten and set on fire in Bangladesh's Mymensingh district over allegations of blasphemy.

Following the protests, the Indian board asked Knight Riders to drop Mustafizur. —Reuters

United sack Amorim after turbulent 14-month tenure

LONDON: Ruben Amorim's turbulent 14-month tenure as Manchester United manager ended abruptly on Monday when he was sacked a day after voicing a passionate defence of his role and vowed not to quit in the wake of a disappointing 1-1 draw with Leeds United.

The dismissal of the Portuguese follows growing tensions between Amorim and the Old Trafford hierarchy, including director of football Jason Wilcox, in recent days. Current under-18s coach Darren Fletcher will take charge of the team against struggling Burnley on Wednesday.

"With Manchester United sitting sixth in the Premier League, the club's leadership has reluctantly made the decision that it is the right time to make a change. This will give the team the best opportunity of the highest possible Premier League finish," the club said in a statement.

The Portuguese coach, 40, took over from Erik ten Hag in November 2024, ending his first season with the club 15th in the Premier League — their worst placing since they were relegated in 1974 — and losing to Tottenham Hotspur in the Europa League final.

This season they are sixth after 20 games — 17 behind leaders Arsenal — having won three of their last 11 matches and the Leeds result triggered a fiery outburst in a press conference from the usually mild-mannered and refreshingly honest coach.

He bristled at questions about his job security, delivering a defiant message that he came to United as a manager with full authority and not merely a coach taking orders.

The Portuguese told the scouting department and Wilcox "to do their job" during a blockbuster end to a post-match press conference that raised major doubts over his future.

Amorim repeatedly suggested to the media that he would leave when his contract expired in 18 months' time. But reports said United's decision to axe their manager was due to the lack of evolution and progress during his 14-month tenure rather than a power struggle.

It is a dismal end to the reign of Amorim, who won just 25 of his 63 games at the helm in all competitions.

In the Premier League he had the worst win ratio (32 percent), the worst goals-conceded-per-game ratio (1.53) and the lowest clean-sheet ratio (15 percent) of any United manager.

Amorim has been hit by injuries and a number of players are on Africa Cup of Nations duty but he has been criticised for sticking rigidly to his preferred 3-4-3 formation despite evidence it was not the best fit for his players.

The club's hierarchy will now set about trying to find a big-name operator who can bring back the glory days of the Alex Ferguson era.

Since Ferguson retired in 2013, United have turned to David Moyes, Louis van Gaal, Jose Mourinho, Ole Gunnar Solskjaer, Ralf Rangnick and Ten Hag with very limited success and it is now 13 years since they won the last of their 20 league titles.

Amorim's sacking comes four days after Chelsea's Enzo Maresca also departed after an apparent fallout with his club's leadership.—Agencies

NZ have learned lessons from T20 World Cup flop: Neesham

BENGALURU: Poor preparation derailed New Zealand's Twenty20 World Cup campaign in 2024 but the Black Caps will leave no stone unturned as they approach next month's global showpiece seeking their first title, all-rounder James Neesham said.

Determined to avoid another group-stage exit, New Zealand will head into the next edition in India and Sri Lanka with proper match practice thanks to a five-game T20 series scheduled against India from January 21-31.

"Obviously, the 2024 World Cup in West Indies, we were very under-prepared," Neesham told Reuters via video call. "We didn't have any games going into the tournament, which wasn't ideal, coming off the back of the Indian Premier League and a lot of guys being busy over there.

"We've rectified that and we've got a good series against a strong team getting into the World Cup."

The 35-year-old said playing India on their own turf would help New Zealand finalise their starting 11 for the tournament, which begins on February 7.

"It'll be good to have five games to test ourselves against them and hopefully get a couple of good wins, some good results, but mainly hopefully find our combinations and get ourselves well oiled before the World Cup," Neesham added.

While Neesham remains a T20 regular for New Zealand he has not played for the national team in the 50-overs format since the 2023 World Cup.

"I'm certainly still available currently for that format," he said.

"I haven't quite decided what my future looks like internationally. I'll probably have a think about that during this World Cup and probably make a decision one way or the other."

That uncertainty is compounded by New Zealand's new casual contract system, introduced last September, that allows marquee players to play in lucrative T20 leagues while remaining available for international duty.

Neesham, who played in the International League T20 with Dubai Capitals, said the system has left players in a "weird little limbo" by allowing them to join events like Australia's Big Bash and still arrive late for the World Cup under contract.

The model risks weakening New Zealand if too many top players are absent, he said.

"You either have to have white-ball contracts specifically for these kinds of players that are actually worth a fair amount of money that will keep players available for New Zealand and in those formats, or you need to let guys go freelance and pick and choose whatever they want," Neesham said. "Currently as things stand in New Zealand, there's probably not the depth of players that will allow us to still compete on the international stage, if we have 10, 11, or 12 of our top guys not available.

"It's important that over the next major contract cycle or master agreement we have in New Zealand, it's really fleshed out from that perspective to make the top T20 and one-day cricketers a bit more valuable from a financial point of view."

Neesham said that a proposed domestic T20 competition might entice players to accept New Zealand contracts and be involved fully with the international team.

New Zealand begin their World Cup campaign against Afghanistan in Chennai on February 8.—Reuters